The Basics of Scots Heraldry

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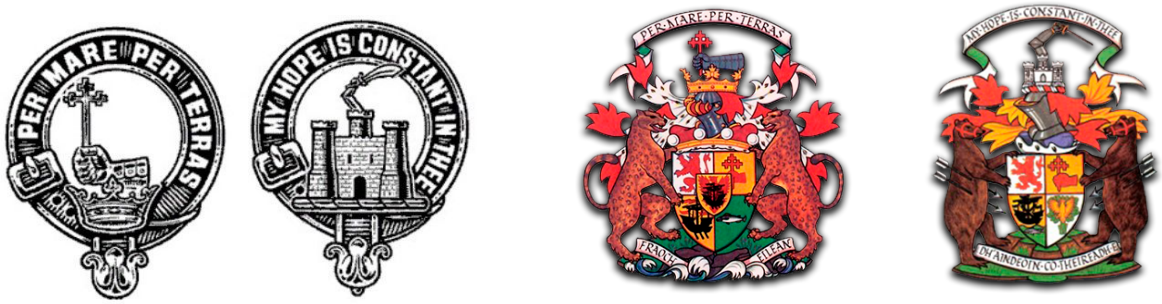
Heraldry is a wonderful and beautiful form of art. It can be simple in its design or complex, and is found all around us in Scottish history and culture. Scots heraldry can often be confusing to a beginner and after hundreds of years of tradition there have been some misunderstandings that have become ingrained in our cultural memory. The customs of arms are rather set in stone in Scotland and as there is no heraldic authority in the US many companies have capitalised on those aforementioned misunderstandings to make money and sadly perpetuate the myths. The purpose of this document is to hopefully dispel some common errors and misunderstandings on coats of arms, along with providing a basic guide to heraldic practices and law.

Her Majesty's Scottish Arms

The most common misconception and myth we must dispel before beginning is this; the idea of a "family coat of arms" or "family crest". I assure you that no such thing exists in Scots heraldry, this extends to countries in the commonwealth(IE Canada, Australia, etc. as well as the Republic of Ireland) that follow the British rules and customs of Heraldry(and for as long as the United States has been a country the British rules of heraldry have been used by default.) In fact there are only a small handful of European countries where undifferenced arms may be born by more than one person and even then the crests are often different. Heraldry is personal, meaning arms are owned and used by an individual and not a family.

Family members of an Armiger(someone who has arms) may use a Differenced form of their relatives arms, this is shown by a specific device added to the shield or a border around it(see document on differencing). The crest off of a chief's arms are also their own and are not a "family or Clan" crest, it is used by clansmen with permission and is to only be shown in a strap and buckle.



From Left to Right: Clansman's badges of Macdonald of that Ilk and MacDonald of Clanranald, the arms of Macdonald of that Ilk(The High Chief) and The Captain of Clanranald

We should establish what makes up a coat of arms. The coat of arms is most often displayed in the form of the "Full Achievement" This consists of, in its most simplistic form, the Shield, the Helm, the Crest, Mantling, and the Motto. No matter what, if arms are Granted or Assumed it will at the very least be made up of these parts. Some things such as coronets of rank and supporters are only granted to those who are Peers, Clan Chiefs, and other high ranking individuals.

The most basic and easiest way to identify the rank of the armiger is via the style of helm on his achievement of arms. If the Helm is plain and the visor closed the armiger is a Gentleman(people assuming arms should use this helm as the generic default) If the helm's visor is shown with a gold bar on the visor the armiger is an Esquire. If the Helm's visor is shown open(also known as lifted) the armiger is a Knight. If the Helm has three gold bars the armiger holds a Scottish Feudal Barony, and if the helm has five bars the armiger is a Peer. The helm of the Sovereign is a special barred design. Supporters which are another indication of rank are only granted to Peers and Scottish Chiefs.

The Full Achievement of the arms of
The Rt. Hon. Godfrey James Macdonald of Macdonald, 8th Baron Macdonald, Chief of the Name and the Arms of Macdonald, High Chief of Clan Donald, and 34th Hereditary Chief of Clan Donald

Arms can be gained in two basic forms, through a Grant or by Assumption. In the United Kingdom there are Heralds divided up in each kingdom, in Scotland there is Lord Lyon King of Arms and his office(Lyon Court), in England there is the Garter King of Arms; In Canada there is a Chief Herald. Through these offices one may seek a grant of new arms or a matriculation of existing arms, this is for those who are the nearest living decent to a now deceased armiger. In the United States there is no Heraldic Authority, meaning that individuals who can not or wish not to seek a grant or matriculation in another country may Assume Arms. This means one may, with the help of someone well versed in heraldry, design arms and adopt them for themselves. When pursuing this route it is important to read into the rules and customs of heraldry to make sure that mistakes in protocol or violations in tincture are not made. The best route as always with pursuing something new is to find someone who knows and understands the topic well, and to also not use any items or indicators of rank that you are not entitled to. (if you want to know more about this process contact us through our email on the Heraldry page)

In conclusion there are many great resources online and in print, you can not fail if you do a little reading or find a herald/artist, when it comes to arms if they're not yours do not display then, if you are at a clan tent only display your chiefs arms if they have given permission for the clan to do so. Below will be sources and a few websites listed and other documents concerning heraldic flags, etc.

Resources:

Lyon Court:
https://www.courtofthelordlyon.scot/

Garter King of Arms and College of Arms:
https://www.college-of-arms.gov.uk/

Society of Scottish Armigers:
http://www.scotarmigers.net/

Heraldic Flags:
http://www.scotarmigers.net/pdfs/info-leaflet-3.pdf

Scottish Crest Badges:
http://www.scotarmigers.net/pdfs/info-leaflet-2.pdf

Differencing:
http://www.scotarmigers.net/pdfs/info-leaflet-6.pdf

The Use of Personal Arms:
http://www.scotarmigers.net/pdfs/info-leaflet-9.pdf

Territorial Designations:
http://www.scotarmigers.net/pdfs/information-leaflet-20-Territorial-Designations.pdf

Titles:
http://www.scotarmigers.net/pdfs/titles-primer-ssa.pdf